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ABSTRACT

The experience chart, perceived as a reading instruction method for early primary grade students only, can actually be used on any grade level. There are a plethora of reasons for using experience charts in reading instruction for low achievers among middle school readers, including the following: content is based on background experiences of students following the observation of objects on an interest center; content is familiar to students and now needs to be presented and read with the use of abstract symbols; students associate printed words on the chalkboard with reality on an interest center; and students are able to develop a basic sight word reading vocabulary. There are increasingly high standards which students need to achieve in reading with state-mandated objectives in vogue. The language experience approach, also called the experience chart, is an approach in teaching reading in which students dictate a story based on experiences they have had. The Big Book is another approach which can be used with middle schoolers reading below grade level. The Big Book philosophy differs from the experience chart in the following ways: it has print material written by the text writers; it has a book or text, enlarged, so that all can see clearly when they read aloud; and it emphasizes no input from learners in developing the materials to be read. Both approaches stress students reading aloud with teacher leadership. (NKA)

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Middle Schoolers, Experience Charts and the Big Book.

by Marlow Ediger

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MIDDLE SCHOOLERS, EXPERIENCE CHARTS AND THE BIG BOOK

Too frequently, the experience chart is perceived as a method of reading instruction for early primary grade pupils only. Little thought is given to its wise use on the middle school level. The experience chart can be used on any grade level in the teaching of reading. When supervising student teachers in the public schools, the author noticed its use on the sixth grade level. There were four pupils in a class of twenty four who were heavily involved in developing and reading content from experience charts. Why was this being emphasized for these sixth readers? They were reading, approximately, three grade levels below their present grade level as measured by a standardized test -- The Iowa Test of Basic Skills. These four pupils seemingly were heavily engaged in the experience chart approach in reading instruction.

The student teacher/cooperating teacher had placed objects on an interest center for these four sixth graders to discuss among themselves. Following the openended discussion, pupils were to present ideas on what was observed. Selected guidelines were listed by the teachers for recording these ideas. These were the following:

1. all participate and no one dominate.
2. each person is to have a chance to present ideas.
3. no idea is to be ridiculed; politeness is important.
4. no one is to interrupt others in presenting ideas.

The above were enforced. If, for example, a pupil would interrupt another, the teacher would stop and ask, "Which rule was violated?" Pupils identified the involved problem.

After about eight lines of ideas were presented and recorded on the chalkboard, the teacher read aloud the entire selection while pupils watched carefully as each word was pointed to and read. Next, pupils would read together with the teacher, and then rereading was done as often as desired. Each time the teacher observed to notice that pupils were on task when looking at each word carefully. It is vital that these sixth graders looked at each word meticulously and had it become a part of their sight word vocabulary. There are a plethora of reasons for using experience charts in reading instruction for low achievers among middle school readers, including the following:

1. the content is based on background experiences of pupils following the observation of objects on an interest center.
2. the content is highly familiar to pupils and now needs to

be presented and read with the use of abstract symbols.

3. pupils could see talk written down as they presented ideas from objects on the interest center.

4. pupils saw that the words recorded related to what they had experienced.

5. pupils noticed a sequence of ideas as the teacher recorded ordered sentences.

6. pupils associated printed words on the chalkboard with reality on an interest center.

7. pupils noticed that recorded ideas could be decoded through oral reading.

8. pupils were able to develop a basic sight word reading vocabulary.

9. pupils reread the contents in order to reinforce the new words read.

10. pupils felt security with learning new words in reading by reading within a group setting (Ediger, 2001, 22-26).

Pupils found the experience chart approach in reading was satisfying in that printed words represented what they had said for teacher recording. These printed words could now be read and they looked increasingly familiar as rereading occurred. The student teacher and the cooperating teacher noticed that these four pupils developed confidence in reading which they did not have previously. This was shown as the four pupils participated in the regular reading program. Pupils here could identify an increasing number of words In the basal used. Teachers kept track of the experience chart words and how they related to words pupils experienced from the basal. Pupils could use head phones for listening to the content therein as they followed along in the basal. Pupils then understood the content read and learned to identify new words.

There are increasingly high standards which pupils need to achieve in reading with state mandated objectives in vogue. All pupils will be tested in grades three through eight beginning in the 2005- 2006 school year. Each of these school years need to have challenging objectives to achieve. These will tend to be state mandated objectives. If pupils do not succeed in passing a grade level state mandated test, they may be held back from being promoted to the next grade level.

Middle school pupils who do not read well need to have a reading curriculum which assists them to achieve on grade level. Using experience charts may assist in taking care of deficiencies so that pupils read at least on grade level. Why might experience charts help?

1. pupils may read subject matter based on what they have personally experienced.

2. pupils can see the relationship between their own experiences and encoding the contents.

3. pupils receive practice in oral communication. Quality oral communication is necessary for individuals to read well. Experience charts amount to talk written down and read. It is good for pupils to experience the relationship directly between what is said and what is printed.

4. pupils may hear what they said being modified for clarity sake before its recording takes place.

5. pupils notice different ways of saying things as each pupil contributes to the experience chart.

6. pupil products may be kept from the sequential experience charts and be bound. Learners might then notice that they are authors. Pupils may check these out for individual reading and thus practice reading.

7. pupils may master the correct reading of each chart and notice growth in the number of sight words possessed.

8. pupils grew in their oral abilities to provide content for experience charts.

9. pupils rated these experiences high on a questionnaire, using a five point Likert Scale. The four involved pupils gave it a four rating, based on a five point scale with five being the highest rating.

10. pupils are given considerable help in developing a sight vocabulary since the teacher goes over the completed experience chart as often as learners desire to do so (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Sixteen).

The language experience approach (LEA), also called the experience chart, is an approach in teaching reading in which students dictate a story based on their experiences they have had. The dictated story is written down by a teacher or aide and used to instruct the students in reading.

When initiating the language experience approach, start with group stories so that the class becomes familiar with procedures. As students share experiences and learn about each other, this also builds a sense of community.

Because language experience approach is based on students' individual background, it allows each student to share his/her culture, experience, and mode of self expression. It has the power to promote understanding and community among students whose backgrounds may differ (Gunning, 2000).

The experience chart (LEA) begins instruction with where the pupil is presently in reading achievement. Oral language used personally by the learner is appropriate for his/her present stage of development. The oral language is translated into a code, the English language. The code used is located right in front of the pupil's eyes to be visualized on the chalkboard by the teacher's written manuscript symbols. The sequence of lines presented comes from children being taught. Built in assistance in word recognition comes from the teacher as he/she reads the contents orally together with the involved children. Practice in the read aloud helps pupils to identify and retain words contextually, not in isolation.

The experience chart may be developed pertaining to any academic area for middle schoolers. Thus, science, social studies, literature, mathematics, art, music, and physical education may provide the subject matter for providing an experience chart.

Primary grade pupils may experience a rich writing curriculum in social studies through the use of the experience chart. To provide readiness, the teacher may have selected objects on an interest center. For example, the following objects from the Middle East provide a model:

1. a shepherd's flute used for entertainment while herding sheep.
2. a cloak and baggy trousers worn by Bedouins.
3. a drum made from goat's skin stretched over a jug made from clay.
4. a bedouin coffee pot.

The above objects were discussed by a student teacher and a cooperating teacher, whom the author supervised, with involved learners. The discussion was lively and enthusiastic. Pupils had not seen these objects before and appeared highly curious as to their use and origin. A map of the Middle East was shown to these first grade pupils. Questions were definitely involved from pupils during the discussion. The resulting experience chart reveals the kind of thinking learners were engaged in. The teachers then recorded the following comments of pupils after discussing objects from the interest center:

We blew into the shepherd's flute and were not able to make a sound. It was fun to do so. The drum made soft sounds when we hit it with the palm of our hands. The cloak was too large to fit any of us properly We looked at the wide baggy trousers and marveled how they looked. We really enjoyed sitting in a circle and pretending that coffee was being drunk using the bedouin

coffee pot (Ediger, 1997, 110- 111). Holism is involved in developing an experience chart in that pupils view all objects on the interest center, not a part only. From objects observed, pupils with teacher guidance develop an entire experience chart.

The Big Book

The Big Book approach is generally used to tech early primary grade pupils in reading. There is no reason why this procedure may not be used with middle schoolers who are reading below grade level. Any book may be used as a Big Book as long as all pupils being taught can see the contents clearly in the same book. Thus, Big Books are listed for many smaller library books which can be also be purchased. A Big Book is one which can be enlarged from a smaller size. If, or example, six pupils are taught collectively from the same book, they should be able to readily see the print discourse.

The teacher first discusses the illustrations in the Big Book with children being taught. He/she should develop curiosity for learning through the large illustrations. The teacher then reads aloud the contextual print. Pupils notice the print discourse as they follow along with the read aloud. Next, pupils join the read aloud. There are no problems with pronouncing new words since they hear these as the teacher reads aloud. The contents may be reread as often as desired. Pupils have opportunities to develop a basic reading sight vocabulary as they reread the Big Book selection. Words are not broken down into component parts such as in phonics procedures of reading instruction.

The Big Book philosophy of reading instruction differs from the experience chart in the following ways:

1. it has print material written by writers of the text.
2. it has a book or text, enlarged, so all can see clearly when they read aloud and are taught the printed words.
3. it it emphasizes no input from learners in developing the materials to be read.

There are likenesses between the Big Book and experience chart methods of reading instruction:

1. both stress pupils reading aloud with teacher leadership when print materials are used.
2. both have no accompanying manual of instruction.
3. both may reread its contents as often as is desired.
4. both stress developing background information, prior to pupil reading.
5. both emphasize no phonics in reading unless teachers

bring it in when teaching pupils.

6. both stress the importance holism in reading instruction.
7. both provide for pupils reading aloud in contextual situations.
8. both provide for individual differences when pupils read aloud in that they can hear the words being pronounced by others, if they do not know them otherwise.

Simplistic solutions to build strong middle school reading programs do not exist. States, districts, and schools must all do their part to overcome the middle school legacy that eliminated reading classes and reading teachers in order to find time for other subject matter. It won't be easy to provide time for college and university training for reading classes and reading teachers. It won't be easy to provide appropriate college and university training for middle school reading teachers. It won't be easy to rebuild school libraries. Nevertheless, if we believe it is important to have middle school reading programs, we must address the time, personnel, classroom, and library issues, and we must redirect the efforts of states, districts, and schools toward reestablishing reading as a vital and productive part of middle school instruction (Humphrey, 2002).

The Middle Grades Reading Assessment (1995) developed the Middle Grades Reading Network which assesses in the following eight areas:

* access to books. Examines access to current, high interest, and useful books and other reading materials in classrooms, homes, public and school libraries and other locations within the community.
* encouragement to value reading. Measures school efforts to create an environment in which reading is used, promoted, and encouraged.
* time to read. Looks at dedicated time during the day for reading classes and independent reading.
* skilled reader leaders. Takes account of licensed reading teachers and school librarians who continually renew their skills.
* public library support. Examines efforts to engage students with public libraries through visits and support programs for young adolescents.
* community agency support. Measures support of community based programs that encourage students in all aspects of their reading development.
* family support. Examines efforts to encourage family reading activities.

* reading role models. Look at the degree to which teachers and principals serve as role models and provide guidance to ensure that reading is a priority in students' lives.

Each middle school needs to evaluate if they use the above eight standards to improve their reading program. It is imperative that schools work in he direction of improving reading skills for their middle school pupils. It takes strong leadership and positive attitudes in wanting to change what is to what should be in reading instruction for the middle schooler. Money, time, and dedication are necessary ingredients (Ediger, ERIC, 2001).

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